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ABSTRACT

Creating differentiated art curricula to accommodate artistically talented student individual needs may enhance student performance and program outcomes. This digest discusses: (1) individual education plans for artistically able students with exceptionalities; (2) subgroups of students with dual exceptionalities; (3) methods of teaching students with dual exceptionalities; and (4) methods of teaching students with specific disabilities. (Contains 12 references.) (BT)

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Teaching Artistically Able Students With Exceptionalities

By Robin Johnson

Creating differentiated art curricula to accommodate artistically talented students' individual needs may enhance student performance and program outcomes. This Digest discusses (1) individual education plans for artistically able students with exceptionalities, (2) subgroups of students with dual exceptionalities, (3) methods of teaching students with dual exceptionalities, and (4) methods of teaching students with specific disabilities.

Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Since the passage of The Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990, the landscape of art education has changed dramatically. Students with exceptional educational needs (EEN) are mainstreamed with their peers to fulfill the requirement that they be "educated in their least restrictive environment (LRE)" (Individuals With Disabilities Education Act of 1997). Although students with EEN are frequently supported in academic subjects by special instructors or instructional assistants, this often is not the case in areas considered less academic, such as art, music, technology, and physical education. These students have adaptations written into their IEPs by teams that include professionals, social workers, and parents, but rarely art teachers. Because of this, IEPs for mainstreamed students with EEN are often inappropriate in an art education context. Art teachers are finding that specialized adaptations for students with EEN beyond those constructed by regular classroom teachers and special education teachers are necessary (Hillert 1997).

Also, art teachers must work with students of all ability levels with little classroom support. In addition to frequently being left out of the IEP development process, they often are unaware of the variety of disabilities affecting their students. To individualize their curricula to accommodate the varying needs, interests, and abilities of special populations in their classes, art teachers need to request copies of any learning modifications that may be called for by a student's IEP (Yong and McIntyre 1992). There are many ways to describe and categorize characteristics of students with talent in the visual arts (Clark and Zimmerman 1992). An important challenge that many art teachers face is differentiating curricula for students who simultaneously demonstrate artistic talent and exceptionalities in other areas. For these students, artistic expression may be a means of demonstrating their capabilities.

Subgroups of Students with Dual Exceptionalities. Students with dual exceptionalities have both high ability and learning disabilities. Generally, they can be divided into three subgroups.

The first subgroup includes students not identified as having an EEN (Beckley 1998). These students may use their abilities to compensate for disabilities that do not surface in a regular classroom. An art teacher often may discover that a student needs to be referred for assessment.

The second subgroup of students has been identified as having an EEN, but the strengths of their academic and art abilities may go unrecognized (Beckley 1998). These students often face problems in the art room that revolve around disabilities and low self-image. Students with dual exceptionalities often blame themselves for their failures and do not recognize their successes. A challenge to all teachers is to emphasize student success and reinforce it in concrete ways (Vaidya 1993).

The third subgroup of students with dual exceptionalities includes those who demonstrate ability, yet have difficulty performing tasks required in school. This becomes evident in art classes when students have difficulty completing work or maintaining a level of quality in their work consistent with their art abilities. Students need assistance in their areas of weakness, but they also need to recognize and develop their gifts (Beckley 1998). In working with all students who have potential or exhibit art talent, it is as important to consider their working processes as well as their final products and outcomes (Clark and Zimmerman 1992). Note that these groups are not discrete and may overlap.

Methods of Teaching Students with Dual Exceptionalities. Listed below are several modifications that easily can be incorporated into a curriculum for artistically able students with EEN without disrupting their need for differentiation.

The amount of work or size of art projects may be altered:

- Encourage students to complete assignments in small, manageable chunks. Students beginning extensive art projects may need help organizing an individual plan for completing the project.
- If a student easily burns out, recommend that he or she begin with smaller projects and gradually work toward larger ones. In the case of research, for example, students could begin by looking at artists' works for images with which they feel some connection. They could later incorporate information about the artist, the time period during which the art was produced, and media used by the artist, eventually completing a written assignment.

The amount of time given to complete a project may be adjusted:

- Be alert for obsessive behavior. Gifted and talented children often obsess over tasks and have difficulty completing tasks on time (Clark and Zimmerman 1992). If a student has begun work on a large painting and is struggling to finish, have him or her take a day off and try some new materials or begin another project different from the original one.
- Set flexible time schedules. Make art assignments due over the course of several days or even weeks. Provide a range of time during which an assignment may be turned in.
- Encourage steady work habits. Students may keep a log of the work they accomplished in an art period or the teacher may consult with students each day to make sure they are on task.
- Be aware of procrastination. Students with exceptional ability may spend a great deal of time daydreaming (Willard-Holt 1999). If they are thinking about what to do for their next project, take time

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to discuss their plans and use brainstorming techniques to help them discover some possibilities. They also can look at other artists' works or do thumbnail sketches to help them move their project forward.

Methods used by a teacher to deliver information may be modified:

- Teachers can use multimedia demonstrations that the students can easily access. To increase student independence, teachers can demonstrate complicated techniques such as cutting wood blocks for printmaking.
- Use verbal instructions. For example, when demonstrating how to hand-build pottery, explain the process step by step or ask the student to explain the process to clarify his or her understanding.
- Offer written information along with illustrations. Illustrations of a pottery demonstration accompanied by written directions may be useful for students who have difficulty retaining information.

Additional methods can be used by students to complete assignments:

- Make assignments open-ended so that students have opportunities to use higher level thinking skills. For example, when assigning a personally expressive self-portrait, allow students to choose the media they use to complete the assignment.
- Offer options, if not for materials, then for subject matter or style, such as allowing students to choose a topic for a critique about a specific style of art. For example, if a student chooses to critique abstract art, he or she can do so orally, in writing, or by creating artwork that demonstrates individual reactions to abstract art.

Methods of Teaching Students With Specific Disabilities. Below are a few additional suggestions for teaching artistically able students with specific disabilities:

Students with emotional disabilities may respond best to creating artwork that is self-expressive, such as expressionistic or surrealistic images. Teachers should focus on positive experiences, reassure students, and provide them with firm, consistent guidelines and opportunities for interaction with other students.

Students with learning disabilities may need information explained in several ways. Depending on the nature of the specific disability, the student may benefit from oral instruction, written instruction, or demonstration. Students should reiterate art lesson expectations to the teachers to be sure communication is clear.

Students with physical disabilities should be provided materials that allow for maximum independence. The physical environment of the classroom or materials may need to be adapted for their individual needs. Teachers should help students verbalize difficulties they are encountering in order to help them solve art room problems.

Students with hearing impairments should be positioned in the classroom so they can get the teacher's attention and read classmates' facial expressions. Directions should be provided in writing and through demonstration. These students should be involved in group activities such as collaborative art making, critiques, and historical studies of art.

Students with visual impairments require more assistance in visual arts than many of their peers. In providing an art curriculum for these students, consider using the other senses, providing three-dimensional models, focusing on tactile materials, and involving students in art critiques and discussions. Teachers should show students where materials are located and inform students if the room has been rearranged (Rodriguez 1984).

In conclusion, in every case the goal should be student success. Focusing on students' abilities and minimizing their disabilities enhances their own learning as well as the creative atmosphere of the entire art classroom.

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